DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 318 SP 037 196

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TITLE Perceptions of Elementary Education Majors: Students Reflect upon Their Chosen Profession.
PUB DATE Nov 96
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Tuscaloosa, AL, November 6-8, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Education Majors; Elementary Education; Films; Higher Education; Preservice Teacher Education; *Self Concept; *Student Attitudes; Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching (Occupation)

ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the perceptions of preservice elementary education majors. The subjects for this study were obtained from a sample of 79 junior and senior elementary education majors enrolled at a southern university. Students viewed the movie "Mr. Holland's Opus" and were asked to write a reflective paper on their perceptions as these pertained to their chosen profession of teaching. Conclusions were drawn from cross-case analysis. Results indicated that the perceptions of students fell into five main categories: (1) the influence of teachers; (2) the importance of professional and personal time management; (3) the dispelling of erroneous myths about why individuals enter the teaching field; (4) the affirmation of teaching as a career; and (5) aspirations for the future. This study found that these students had positive perceptions of teaching a strong desire to make an impact on children. (JLS)

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ED 405 318

PERCEPTIONS OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION MAJORS: STUDENTS REFLECT UPON THEIR CHOSEN PROFESSION

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Presented at the annual meeting of
Mid South Educational Research Association
November 6-8, 1996

SP037196

PERCEPTIONS OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION MAJORS: STUDENTS REFLECT UPON THEIR CHOSEN PROFESSION

As preservice teachers begin to consider their future roles as classroom teachers, they may vacillate between anticipation and apprehension, eager for the opportunity to begin applying knowledge and skills, but also questioning their preparation and competence (Zabel & Zabel, 1996). The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the perceptions of preservice elementary education majors. By better understanding students perceptions of teaching, we may find ways to help prevent the concept of reality shock as they enter the first year of teaching (Veenman, 1986).

Methodology

The subjects for this study were obtained from a sample of 79 junior and senior teacher-education students enrolled at a southern university. As a part of their on-going course work, students were provided the opportunity to view the current movie Mr. Holland's Opus which dealt with the professional and personal life of a teacher.

Students were requested to write a reflective paper on their perceptions as they pertained to their chosen profession of teaching. Conclusions were drawn from cross-case analysis.

Results

Results of this study indicated that the perceptions of students fell into five main categories which included the influence of teachers, the importance of professional and personal time management, the dispelling of erroneous myths about why individuals enter the teaching field, the affirmation of elementary education as a career, and aspirations for the future.

Influence of Teachers

Kidder (1989, p. 312) stated, "Good teachers put snags in the river of children passing by, and over the years, they redirect hundreds of lives." This redirection of lives and the influence of teachers was indicated by students as being an area of great concern. Christina stated,

> This movie confirmed how influential a teacher can be to a child. Mr. Holland's long written opus represented the years hard-spent as a teacher. It made me realize what a crucial journey teachers take and how everything we do, say or act can sometimes decide what a child becomes. We can either "make" a child by caring and teaching self-worth or "break" a child by not caring and damaging his or her self-esteem.

The following observation was made by Betsy:

> I came away from this movie feeling excited and also a little scared about being a teacher. It is such a responsibility to have these students for such a short time

and yet you can have such an influence on their lives. It really made me understand how important it is to do a good job and be the best teacher that I can be!

Time Management

Teaching can be a good and rewarding job (Charles & Senter, 1995). As rewarding as it is to many, Cruickshank and Callahan (1983) reported that if teachers were unable to deal with personal and professional tasks then the result would be that of stress.

Students did not fail to recognize the importance of professional and personal time management. Jean wrote, "Mr. Holland. . .had to learn in his personal life what he had learned in his professional life, you must begin with what you already have and build on that." Meriam observed, "A good teacher, one with more eustress, will have to prioritize the school and home activities and make time for both. If he does not, he will be in a 'no win' situation in both of the places." Susan also noted the importance of time management in a teacher's professional and personal life when she stated,

> The second event that surprised me was how Mr. Holland was so compassionate with his students and ignored his family. Teachers must find a happy medium between school and family. Molding children into our future is a challenging job. However, one must be able to leave parts of the job at

school. If teachers engulf themselves, it can lead to burn-out or separation of family.

Myths

There are many reasons why people choose to become teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1990). Some, however, enter for wrong reasons. Michael recognized that, like Mr. Holland, he may have entered the teaching field for the wrong reason. He stated,

> The most interesting line in the movie came when the principal told Mr. Holland that teaching is not a job to fall back on. I had never thought of that before this movie. I chose teaching as a field to fall back on if ministry doesn't work out for me. . .I love kids and would enjoy working with them. I only hope that it will not be a job to fall back on.

Robert, on the other hand, is married to a classroom teacher and had experienced the lack of free time for a classroom teacher. He wrote, "We laughed when he [Mr. Holland] told the principal that the reason that he took the teaching job was to have more free time in order to write his music."

Gwen had been told of a teacher's long hours and made the following comment, ". . .I have heard that there is no such thing as an eight hour work day in the teaching field. I never fully understood what they meant. I think I do now."

Affirmation

Mr. Holland's Opus presented visual and insightful lessons on the field of teaching. The candid representations helped students to affirm elementary education as a career. Tonya wrote, "Mr. Holland's Opus is truly an example to follow. If every teacher strived to direct the students instead of just teaching them, then maybe we can make a better impact on them. Therefore, they will make a better impact on society." Heather added, "I only hope I can have a positive affect on my future students. It would be nice to have my students come back and tell me what a great teacher I was."

Aspirations

Students were able to focus on their aspirations for the future. Shelly wrote,

> I felt both hopeful and fearful. I was hopeful that I might be able to make a difference in the life of at least one child. I had (and still have) an overwhelming desire to be the very best teacher ever. However, I was also fearful that I might become one of these stalemate teachers who never touches or inspires anyone -- one who falls into a rut and never gets out. Teachers affect children in unimaginable ways without even knowing it. I want to touch the lives of the students I teach in a positive way. I want them to see in me something that is good, true, and admirable.

Not to be discouraged, Dana wrote, "To see that he [Mr. Holland] made a difference in so many people's lives left me with a feeling that I, too, can do that."

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that students' perceptions of the teaching field were positive and there was a strong desire to make an impact on children. In Michael's words,

> I want to be a teacher that makes everlasting impacts on students. I want to be a teacher whose students can honestly say I have made a difference in their lives. I do not want to retire and feel like I have made no difference. I want to retire with a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment.

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